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ABSTRACT

Despite the pervasiveness of computers and daily advances in computer technology, comparatively little is known about the psychological reactions and attitudes that individuals have toward computers. To investigate sex differences in attitudes, beliefs, feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and behavioral intentions toward computers, 157 male and 305 female undergraduate students were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire. Results showed that while there was no sex difference in access to computers, more men than women reported having used a computer, being enrolled in a computer course, and planning to purchase a computer. Both sexes believed computers to be male sex-typed. Men knew more about computers while women reported experiencing a greater fear of computers. The exponential growth of computers in all facets of life and all sectors of society underlines the necessity of developing successful strategies for dealing with the sex-typing and computer phobias identified in the present study. A seven-page reference list is appended. (LLL)

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Sex Differences in Attitudes, Feelings, and Behaviors Toward Computers

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Abstract

The present study sought to investigate possible sex differences in psychological reactions to computers. A 20-item self-report survey was administered to 157 male and 305 female college students. Results showed that while there was no sex difference in access to computers, more men than women reported having used a computer, being enrolled in a computer course, and planning to purchase a computer. Both sexes believed computers to be male sex-typed. Men knew more about computers while women reported experiencing a greater fear of computers. Possible causes and solutions for the observed male sex-typing of computers and female computer phobia are discussed.

Sex Differences in Attitudes, Feelings, and Behaviors Toward Computers

Contemporary society is in the midst of the computer revolution (Abelson & Hammond, 1977; Simon, 1977). Since their introduction only three decades ago, computers have entered virtually all sectors of society, from their original intended use in the field of scientific research (Davis, 1977), to such diverse fields as business and industry (Balderston, Carman, & Hoggatt, 1977; Jones, 1977; Kearsley, Hunter, & Hillelsohn, 1982), education (Weaver, 1975; Dickerson & Pritchard, 1981), medicine (Bleich, 1971; Card et al., 1974; Grossman, Barnett, McGuire, & Swedlow, 1971; White & Meindl, 1977), psychiatry (Erdman, Greist, Klein, Jefferson, & Getto, 1981; Lucas, Mullins, Luna, & McInroy, 1977), psychotherapy (Slack & Slack, 1977), psychometrics (Skinner & Allen, 1983), etymology (Dilligan, 1982), and art history (Cherlin, 1982).

Despite the pervasiveness of computers and daily advances in computer technology, comparatively little is known about the psychological reactions and attitudes that individuals have toward computers. While general discussions of the potential impact of computers are readily available (e.g., Dennet, 1982; Rheingold, 1983; Wanner, 1982), very few are supported by empirical evidence. The studies that have been conducted suggest that a variety of important individual differences mediate attitudes toward computers and the likelihood of actual interaction with them (Coovert & Goldstein, 1980; Klonoff &

Clark, 1975; Lee, 1970; Orcutt & Anderson, 1977; Scheibe & Erwin, 1979; Wagman, 1983; Zoltan & Chapanes, 1982). The most profound individual difference discussed in the popular press is gender (Johnson, 1983; Kolata, 1984; Maynard, 1983; Van Dusen & Finlayson, 1983). Educators and career counsellors express the opinion that males and females differ in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward computers. It is typically the case that a greater number of males than females enroll in computer courses, choose careers in computer related fields, and purchase home computers. Unfortunately, very little systematic research has been devoted to exploring this apparent relationship.

It was the purpose of the present study, therefore, to provide some preliminary data on possible sex differences in attitudes, beliefs, feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and behavioral intentions regarding computers. It was decided that a self-report questionnaire survey would best serve the purpose of the study given the limited state of our current knowledge. While recognizing the shortcomings of self-report data, it was felt that such a study represents a necessary first step toward understanding gender differences in psychological reactions to computers. In an attempt to ensure both comprehensiveness and generalizability, the survey investigated psychological reactions to computers in general rather than any specific type or use of computers. For this reason, the term "computer" was not defined explicitly in the survey. First year university students were chosen as the most appropriate subjects for the

study because male and female undergraduates are exposed to a relatively uniform environment and typically have an equal opportunity to be exposed to computers. It should be pointed out, however, that the use of college students subjects does represent a conservative test of possible sex differences in psychological reactions to computers. Any differences found in the present study may, therefore, underrepresent the differences that could be observed in other segments of society.

Method

Subjects

A total of 462 undergraduate students, 157 males and 305 females, enrolled in Introductory Psychology classes at Erindale College, University of Toronto participated in the study. The mean age was 20.1 years.

Procedure

Subjects completed the Computer Attitudes Survey (CAS) as part of an in-class mass-testing session. The CAS was developed by the authors for the purpose of the present study. The survey consists of 20 items tapping a variety of attitudes, beliefs, feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and behavioral intentions regarding computers.[1]

Results

Behaviors and Behavioral Intentions

A summary of the behavior and behavioral intention data appear in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Chi-squared analyses of these data revealed that while there was no sex difference in access to computers, a greater number of males than females reported having actually used a computer, $\chi^2(1, N=451)=6.30$, $p<.02$. Furthermore, males were 6 times as likely to be enrolled in a computer course than females, $\chi^2(1, N=462)=24.19$, $p<.001$. Among those not presently enrolled, half of both men and women stated an intention to take a computer course in the future. More men than women reported an intention to purchase a computer in the future, $\chi^2(1, N=454)=3.98$, $p<.05$.

Attitudes, Beliefs, Feelings, and Thoughts

A multivariate analysis of variance performed on the attitude, belief, feeling, and thought items yielded a highly significant effect, $F(13,364)=7.37$, $p<.001$.[2] The univariate analyses achieving significance were as follows: being in favor of having computers in the home, $F(1,364)=4.77$, $p<.05$, male friends' liking of computers, $F(1,364)=7.11$, $p<.01$, fear of computers, $F(1,364)=12.84$, $p<.001$, and number of computer trade names recalled, $F(1,364)=16.98$, $p<.001$. A sex difference in liking of computers achieved marginal significance, $F(1,364)=3.47$, $p<.07$. Examination of means of the significant effects (see Table 2) revealed that the men were more in favor of having computers in the home than were women, and liked computers more than women did; women perceived their male

friends' liking of computers as greater than mens' ratings of their male friends' liking of computers.

Insert Table 2 about here

The most robust and interesting effects obtained were that women reported being more afraid of computers and that men could list a greater number of computer trade names. Variables on which the sexes did not differ were as follows: being in favor of having computers at school, mother's liking of computers, father's liking of computers, female friends' liking of computers, enjoyment of computers, need for computers, capability of computers, and number of places where computers are typically used.

Sex-Typing, Computer Fear, and Desirability of Computers

A summary of these data appear in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

When asked "If a computer were a person, would it be male or female?", men and women responded similarly, with approximately three out of four reporting that it would be male. There was also no sex difference in response to the question "Would you rather use a computer, read a book, watch television, or see your friends?" with only 4.2 percent preferring to use a computer compared to 67.8 percent stating a preference to see their friends. Finally, when asked whether a man or a woman

would be more afraid of computers, a greater number of women than men thought that a woman would experience greater fear, $\chi^2(1, N=359)=3.85, p<.05$.

Discussion

The critical findings of the present study can be found in the pattern of the similarities and differences between male and female subjects. Individuals of both sexes felt equally strongly that there exists a real need for computers, that computers are extremely capable, and that it is vitally important for schools to have them. Moreover, there was no sex difference in reported access to computers, general knowledge of the kinds of places where computers may be located, intention to enroll in a computer course in the future if not doing so at the present time, nor in the preference to use a computer versus reading a book, watching television, or seeing friends. Thus, males and females perceive that they have equal opportunity to work with computers and they also appear not to differ in their general attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge regarding computers. In light of those similarities, the differences seem rather startling. Males were more likely to have actually used a computer, to be currently enrolled in a computer course, to be in favor of having a computer in the home, to be able to recall a greater number of computer brand names, and to have expressed an intention to purchase a computer.

Perhaps the most compelling findings of this study concern the apparent sex-typing of computers. While both sexes

perceived computers to be essentially masculine, females subjects were more apt to view computers as objects for the exclusive use and enjoyment of males. Similarly, females expressed a greater fear of computers, and felt that this fear of computers is typical of most women. These data advance the notion that the study of computers is destined to join the list of disciplines such as mathematics and sciences typically avoided by females (Fennema & Sherman, 1977; Skolnick, Langbort, & Day, 1982). The explanations that have been offered for the paucity of women in these areas may also provide insight into the avoidance of computers by women that was detected in the present study. Horner (1972) has postulated that women are characterized by a "fear of success" and that they view femininity and achievement as being mutually exclusive. In an experiment to test these notions, subjects were asked to complete a story about a young women who had achieved top ranking in a her medical school class. Most women completed the story by indicating that such success might lead to social rejection, loss of attractiveness to men or the loss of femininity. On the other hand, when men were asked to complete the same story about a man, they expressed the belief that the outcome would enhance his social life. A follow-up study (Monahan, Kuhn, & Shaver, 1974) revealed that both male and female subjects reponded negatively to the story of the successul woman. The behavior of the female subjects appeared to confirm the fear of success hypothesis. In addition, males in the study actually expressed hostility towards the

hypothetical successful female, thus providing a justification for the women's fears and, in turn, giving some insight into the possible origins or maintenance of the fear of success.

While Horner's notion of fear of success has enjoyed considerable popularity, an alternative focusing on the "fear of sex-role inappropriateness" may prove to be a more parsimonious explanation of the phenomenon (Tresemer, 1974). Bem and Lenney (1976) conducted a study in which subjects were asked which of 60 different masculine, feminine, and neutral activities they would be willing to perform for pay while being photographed. The experiment also required subjects to actually perform a series of sex-appropriate, sex-inappropriate, and neutral activities. Results of the activity preference ratings showed that individuals were more likely to prefer sex-appropriate activities over sex-inappropriate ones, even though such choices cost them money. Furthermore, engaging in cross-sex behavior was shown to result in psychological discomfort and negative feelings. The latter finding was restricted to subjects who were sex-typed, that is, individuals characterized by a strong identification with their own sex role (i.e., masculine males and feminine females).

Given that subjects in the present study considered computers to be masculine, the finding that female subjects report fear and avoidance of computers corresponds perfectly with the research reported above. They may simply be avoiding engaging in what they consider to be cross-sex

behavior--working with computers--in order to escape the real or imagined negative consequences associated with deviation from accepted sex role expectations.

Observations reported in the popular press lend credence to such an interpretation. Johnson (1983) stated that while females are just as adept at the terminals as males, the "computer's masculine image as a high-tech hunk of equipment" discourages some from ever testing their skills. He quoted a 13-year old girl attending a computer camp: "I think more girls would be interested but they do not want to admit it. I guess they think computers are not a feminine thing".

In view of the fact that computers became popular and widely used during a period when women's groups were lobbying governments and school boards to change stereotyped depictions of women in the various media, it is fascinating that this new object, initially devoid of any sex-typing, should come so quickly to be sex-typed as male. It would have been expected that computers be spared being sex-typed in an environment so apparently conducive to equality of the sexes. Interestingly, recent research on children's reactions to computers (Flett, Vredenburg, & Krames, 1984) corroborates the major findings of the present study and attests to the robustness and pervasiveness of the observed sex differences. Girls and boys both expressed the belief that computers are masculine sex-typed. It is clear then that this attitude is held by younger subjects as well.

Given the apparent consistency of this finding, attempts

must be made to identify the origins of this sex bias. In discussing the sex-typing of computers, Kolata (1984) observed that movies and advertisements for computer games and home computers depict men or boys as the central figures. In contrast, women or girls are depicted as passive observers, if they are shown at all. Thus, the media may again have been the perpetrator of a biased characterization of women. This particular stereotyped portrayal of women is most intriguing because it stands in marked contrast to the ever increasing trend in media advertising toward a general improvement in role portrayals of women in advertisements (Kerin, Lundstrom, & Sciglimpaglia, 1979; Schiebe, 1979; Schneider & Schneider, 1979). This is particularly disturbing in light of observations made by Kolata (1984) and Maynard (1983) that the masculine sex-typing of computers extends to computer careers and is reinforced by such important individuals as parents, guidance counsellors, teachers, and professors.

Despite this negative situation, the present data suggest some remedial possibilities which appear promising. First, since access and ability do not seem to be the critical issues, young girls could be introduced to computers by female role models who are clearly competent with computers and who, as a result of their own enthusiasm and success with computers, can instill a genuine interest and desire to embrace computers as a worthy and desirable field of study for women. Such an approach is already proving helpful in a number of different settings (Kolata, 1984). Second, computer advertising should

feature women in a more active role and computer games could be designed to have a greater appeal for women. These goals should be easy to obtain once the companies instituting them realize that their products will appeal to a much broadened market. Third, in the case of a clear computer phobia, treatment programs could be developed incorporating central components of traditional psychological therapies, such as systematic desensitization (e.g., Wolpe, 1973). While initial steps have already been taken in this direction (e.g., Galagan, 1983; Jay, 1981), innovative techniques are still required in order to alter females' anxiety and the negative self-perception arising from the use of computers. One recent treatment study of computer anxious women (Vredenburg, Flett, & Krames, 1984) has provided support for the efficacy of using computer-delivered contingent positive reinforcement in the amelioration of computer anxiety. This study demonstrates the potential usefulness of basic learning principles in designing software for introducing computer anxious individuals to computers. Although video game designers have used basic learning principles to great advantage for some time (Loftus & Loftus, 1983), the designers of nongame software have largely ignored them.

The exponential growth of computers in all facets of life and all sectors of society underlines the vital importance and urgency of developing successful strategies for dealing with the sex-typing and computer phobias identified in the present paper. Future research should examine the relative efficacy of

the various solutions discussed. Similarly, there is an increasing need for empirical investigation of the antecedents and consequents of interactions with a variety of computers--from large mainframes to personal computers to small home video game machines--and the psychological processes underlying each of these interactions.

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Footnote

[1]Consistent with the survey nature of this measure, no effort has been made to determine the psychometric properties of this instrument. Instead, each item is treated as a separate dependent measure.

[2]Only those subjects having no missing data on the attitude, belief, feeling, and thought items were included in the multivariate analysis of variance.

Table 1

Sex Differences in Behaviors and Behavioral Intentions Regarding Computers

Item	n	Males	Females
Having used a computer.	451	74.0	62.1**
Having access to a computer.	449	40.0	34.8
Enrolled in a computer course.	462	14.0	2.3***
Intend to enroll in a course.	416	51.5	52.1
Intend to purchase a computer.	454	59.4	49.5*

Note. Values represent percentage responding in the affirmative (yes) direction.

*$p<.05$. **$p<.02$. ***$p<.001$.

Table 2

Sex Differences in Attitudes, Beliefs, Feelings, and Thoughts Regarding Computers[a]

Item	Males		Females	
	M	SD	M	SD
In favor of having computers in the home.	5.00	1.82	4.58	1.78*
In favor of having computers at school.	5.66	1.77	5.77	1.53
Liking of computers.	4.57	1.74	4.23	1.66
Mother's liking of computers.	3.40	1.58	3.34	1.65
Father's liking of computers.	4.26	1.83	4.36	1.87
Female friends' liking of computers.	3.96	1.42	4.16	1.48
Male friends' liking of computers.	5.07	1.50	5.46	1.31**
Fear of computers.	2.23	1.60	2.92	1.88***
Enjoyment of computers.	4.90	1.84	4.80	1.68
Need for computers.	5.78	1.36	5.79	1.27
Capability of computers.	6.04	1.13	6.15	1.04
Number of types of locations of computers.	4.97	7.92	5.35	3.79
Number of computer makes recalled.	5.28	6.11	3.25	3.46***

Note. Values represent means on 7-point Likert response format scales anchored at 1 and 7 with "not at all" and "very much", respectively, for all but the last two items which represent the mean number of locations and computer makes listed in response to open-ended questions.

[a]Based on the responses of 157 males and 305 females.

*$p<.05$. **$p<.01$. ***$p<.001$.

Table 3

Sex Differences in Sex-Typing, Computer Fear, and Desirability of Computers

Item	n	Males	Females
Perceived gender of computers	301		
- male		74.0	73.6
- female		26.0	26.4
Sex perceived to be most afraid of computers	359		
- males		29.5	20.3
- females		70.5	79.7*
Most Preferred Activity	454		
- use a computer		3.9	4.3
- read a book		15.0	25.6
- watch television		7.8	5.0
- see friends		73.2	65.1

Note. Values represent percentage responding in the direction indicated.

*$p < .05$.